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Utopiae Insulae Figura : Utopian Insularity and the Politics of Form

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This essay is informed by the premise that critical reflection on the figure of insularity can only begin with a reflexive turn to the homologies which mutually implicate the ostensible subject and object of such reflection. Taking utopian discourse as an emblematic illustration of the ways in which insularity extends well beyond the realm of the referent, insinuating itself in the very conception of the utopian imagination, I outline the ways in which utopian discourse in the early modern era thinks "with," rather than merely "about," insular space. In effect, I argue, the analysis of utopian discourse's deployment of insularity necessitates a move beyond the traditional hermeneutic binaries of "form" and "content," "interiority" and "exteriority," "autonomy" and "heteronomy," "utterance" and "enunciating instance." Both formalist and socio-historical readings of the utopian text are used to demonstrate that *the insulae figura* is rifted by a series of contradictions—spatial as well as ideological—that prevent it from ever coinciding, circularly and tautologically, with itself.

> *That which, like a field, was to receive the divine seed, he [the demiurge] made round in every way and called that portion of the marrow 'brain' [ἐγκέφαλον], because it was going to be placed in the vessel of every living being's head…Here he situated the anchoring site of all the bonds to the soul, and began to build our whole body around it…they [the demiurge's descendants], fearing to pollute the divine any more than*

was absolutely unavoidable, gave to the mortal nature a separate habitation in another part of the body, placing the neck between them to be the isthmus and boundary, which they constructed between the head and breast to keep them apart.[1]

…this sceptred isle…This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessèd plot, this earth, this realm…
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings…[2]

I. Utopian Islands and Humanist Minds

Let us begin by reflecting on the words through which this colloquium opens its invitation to reflection: "*L' insularité…fut et est toujours un objet de réflexion.*" [3] And let us reflect, first of all, on the etymological origins of "reflection," which are ironically bound to designate not an origin but its return, refraction, or reduplication; "reflection" designates a bending, torsion or folding back, a *re-flexio*—literally of light or of a visible image, and, via the relay of a qualitatively transformative metaphor, of the immaterial and invisible process of thought. What is designated as the object of such a process in the specific occasion of this colloquium, we duly note, is insularity—the geo-morphological property of islands, but also of all sorts of forms of spatial enfolding and circumscription. Etymology, then, yields a certain homology, a relationship of mirroring between reflection and its alleged object; in the Platonic passage of my epigraph, the insular entity the philosophical mind reflects on is none other than the physical geography of the mind itself: a fully rounded island, encased in the protective fold of bone, separated from the inferior continent of the body by the "*ἰσθμόν καὶ ὅρον*"—the isthmus and boundary—of the neck. The island, the mind, the cyclical trajectory of the mind's reflective turn to its own self: reflection on insularity begins, and can only begin, by taking stock of this series of echoes and homologies that mutually imbricate the

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[1] Plato, *Timaeus*, ed. and trans. Vassilis Kalfas, Athens, Polis, 1995, 73c-73d; 69c-69e. I have based my translation on Desmond Lee, *Timaeus and Critias*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin, 1977, but have introduced a number of modifications and adjustments.

[2] William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, ed. Andrew Gurr, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 2.1, 40-51.

[3] Colloque *Poésie et Insularité*, 17-19 March 2006, University of Cyprus.

subject and object of reflection, this hall of mirrors where the very possibility of an immaculate beginning is endlessly displaced.

We may now be better prepared to appreciate the fecundity of the recent theoretical turn from an empirico-geographical conception of insularity toward one which privileges its phenomenological entanglements with imagination and the imaginary: islands, as Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith point out, are figures for figuration itself, surfaces which reflect back to the mind an image of its own meaning-making processes.[4] This is why insularity, to recall John Gillis' words, is something one "thinks with" rather than simply "about."[5] Thinking with islands: this is an apt way of describing the process involved in the mythopoetic deployment and critical analysis of insularity in early modern utopia—an emphatically maritime literary genre, and one where islands are by definition devoid of a real place other than the one where space is produced as a mental category, the *chora* of the mind itself. Consider, for instance, Laurent Gervereau's reading of the "*Utopiae Insulae Figura*" (figure 1), the woodcut that adorns the first edition of the book that generated the genre, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516).

Figure 1. Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*. Louvain, Belgium: Arte Theodorici Martini, 1516

[4] Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith, "Editors' Introduction" in Edmond and Smith (eds.), *Islands in History and Representation*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 5.

[5] John R. Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p.1. The ambiguity of the genitive in Gillis' title is crucial to the form of the argument I am making here.

The illustration, Gervereau observes, appears to superimpose cartography on anatomy, fashioning the island in the likeness of "a human brain…[i]mmured behind its protective skull," "the nucleus of a thought that is insulated from the adjacent turmoil."[6] As in Johann Valentin Andreae's *Menippus* (1617), utopia is "*insula, quam Mundi mare indique impetit*"—an island the sea of the world attacks on all sides.[7] Between Platonic cosmology and early modern utopianism, an interesting inversion: if the *Timaeus* imaged the brain in insular terms, More imagines the island in cerebral ones. In both cases, the fundamental logic of the figure remains the same; the island functions as a spatialized, reified *analogon* of the mind that envisions itself in terms of autonomy and sovereignty, of prophylactic insulation from the "pollutions" or "infections" of the world outside its bounded realm. May we not venture that the insular anatomy of the brain in Plato's *Timaeus* already informs the prophylactic topography of the imaginary city in his *Critias* or *Atlanticos*, and that the conjunction between the two will furnish the basic semiotic language of the utopian island of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries?

Plato's Atlantis, let us remember, lapses into disequilibrium and incoherence as soon as its capital stops being a fully bounded island. Poseidon's mortal descendants rupture what Plato describes as the sacred enclosure the God builds around the site of his deposited semen, the mound on which he "mixes" with the mortal Cleito and which he renders "*ἄβατον ἀνθρώποις*."[8] Once punctured by bridges and canals, Poseidon's enclosing rings of earth and sea turn the protective moat into a bay, open to the influx of the sea and to what it carries: the vulgar bustle of trade and the temptations of imperial ambition—in short, the interlinked forces that both made and unmade Plato's own Athens during the Peloponnesean war. The Platonic juxtaposition of the mythic timelessness of island being to the fluctuations and disturbances of historical becoming may go some way toward explaining the conservative appeal of islomania to those utopian dreamers who experienced the anxiety of being condemned to the wrong side of history's course—religious and political martyrs like More and Campanella, *déclassé* Tories like Swift, or exiled royalists like Margaret Cavendish, whose post-Restoration *The*

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[6] Laurent Gervereau, "Symbolic Collapse: Utopia Challenged by its Representations" in Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent (eds.), *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*, New York: The New York Public Library, 2000, p. 358.

[7] Quoted in Edward H. Thompson, "The Text of *Christianopolis*," *Christianopolis*, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1999. p. 156

[8] Plato, Crit. 113e.

Blazing World (1666) tellingly links utopia's spatial domain to that of the Platonic *cerebrum*: [9]

> every human creature can create an immaterial world fully inhabited by immaterial creatures, and populous of immaterial subjects…within the compass of the head or skull; And since it is in your power to create such a world, what need you to venture life, reputation and tranquility to conquer a gross material world?[10]

Cavendish's hypostatization of a safe, if self-avowedly impotent autonomy of the mind speaks quite emphatically to the conflicted and ambiguous political situation of the humanist intellectual: his detachment, on the one hand, from the culture of what Gramsci called the "national popular," and on the other, from the increasingly disintegrating structures of the Church and the absolutist state.[11] It is precisely such attachment to the ideas of autarchy and autonomy, Christopher Kendrick has shown, that provided humanists like More with something like a class affiliation with the "petty class" of small property holders. Utopian islands, in this sense, become the habitats of a class desire for "petty paradise"—an autarchic and self-sufficient collective being which wishfully salvages the autonomy of petty production from the ravages of the "noble retrenchment and counterattack" that marked so-called primitive accumulation.[12] The representation of petty labor, in turn, already translates humanist subjectivity, for both, as Kendrick shows, hinge on the autonomy-conferring and individuating status of skilled work.[13]

Johann Valentin Andreae's *Christianopolis* (1619) constitutes something like a textbook illustration of the imaginary geography generated by this wishful alliance. The utopian polity is situated in a physically tiny yet spectacularly abundant island, blessed with "cornfields and pastures, watered by streams and fountains,

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[9] "[The harbor] filled with ships and merchants arriving from all quarters [whose vast numbers occasioned], *incessant shouting, noise and all sorts of uproar, day and night*" (Plato, Crit. 117e; emphasis added).

[10] Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World and Other Writings*, London, Penguin, 2004, pp. 185-6.

[11] On the hypostatization of autonomy by "traditional intellectuals" Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, New York, International Publishers, pp.7-8. On the cosmopolitanism of Renaissance humanism and its isolation from national-popular culture, see Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, trans. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 199 ff.

[12] Kendrick, "More's *Utopia* and Uneven Development," *boundary 2*, vol. 13, nº 2-3 , 1985, p. 254.

[13] Kendrick, p.251.

adorned with woods and vineyards, and full of livestock."[14] Dwelling in the interior island of a square fortified city, the inhabitants of Caphar Salama supplement such natural plenty with their labor, the sum of whose forms is neatly distributed along the four wings of the square's perimeter: agriculture and stock-raising in the east, milling and baking in the south, meat and fish processing in the north, smelting, casting and moulding in the west. The walls that physically isolate and protect the insular city are then also the conduits which secure its economic autarchy and self-sufficiency, a nerve system through which use value is produced and circulated to the members of the community. An inner square charts artisanal labor in relation to its primary materials (metal, stone, wood, and textiles), while the architectural "heart of Christianopolis" is its paradigmatically humanist college, housing not only lecture halls, but also a comprehensive library collection, the community's archives, a printing press, a chemical and an anatomy laboratory, a pharmacy, a museum of natural history, an astronomical laboratory and a museum of astronomy.[15] The architectural schema turns out to map the text's political unconscious: if the outer layers of primary production and artisanal labor literally enfold the nerve center of humanist knowledge production, they also veil the humanist subjectivity that has imaginatively generated them in the first place. Humanism, to put it otherwise, vests itself with the substantiality of the self-sustaining collective, while transferring onto the latter its own intellectual skills:

> On the other side of the gate are the workers' quarters, where seven more workshops have been assigned to the manufacture of salt, glass, bricks, earthenware and all other things which require repeated heating. Here indeed is to be seen the exploration of nature, since whatever the earth contains in its depths is subjected to the laws and instruments of science. This is not done by men who are driven to mindless labour like beasts of burden, but on the contrary by men who have long been trained in an accurate knowledge of natural philosophy, and who therefore find

[14] Johann Valentin Andreae, *Christianopolis*, ed. and trans. Edward H. Thompson, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1999, p. 156. The utopian fixation with impossibly fertile and prosperous islands is a feature of imaginary geography that clashes quite dramatically with the empirical realities of island life. As Fernand Braudel was to remark on the occasion of Mediterranean islands, "extraordinary fauna and flora can never be taken to indicate abundance. None of the islands was assured for the future. The great problem for all of them, never or only partly solved, was how to live off their own resources, off the soil, the orchards, the flocks…All the islands with a few exceptions (Sicily in particular) were lands of hunger. The extreme cases were the Venetian islands of the Levant: Corfu, Crete, or Cyprus, which were constantly threatened by famine in the second half of the [sixteenth] century." *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, New York, Harper & Row, 1973, p. 152.

[15] Andreae, *Christianopolis,* pp. 163-72, 186, 203-18.

> pleasure in the inner workings of nature…The distinctively novel thing is this, that almost all of these craftsmen are educated men…They think that learning is not of such subtlety, and craftsmanship is not so difficult, that one man is not able to master both if he has the time.[16]

What defines humanist utopianism as such, of course, is the fact that its attempt to overcome the historical contradiction between intellectual autonomy and political dependency is always already doomed to historical failure, and hence to the reality principle it is supposed to suspend or repress: intellectuals isolated from the social base of collectivities, collectivities deprived of the ideological leadership of intellectuals. "I have constructed," Andreae confesses at the outset, "a community for myself in which I exercise authority. And if you take my weak body for this community, your guess will not be too far from the truth."[17] The truth is told somewhat misleadingly, of course; it is not the humanist's "weak body" that one finds hidden inside layers of Christianopolitan walls, but his potent mind. Though it has rarely been praised for the acuity of its literary insight, Friedrich Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* is uncannily precise in bringing to the surface this simultaneously submerged and genre-endemic *topos*: if the utopians are prone to the idealist fallacy of standing the world on its head, it suggests, it is because they attempt to derive "the solution of social problems, which as yet lay hidden in undeveloped economic conditions…out of the human brain."[18]

But I would like to restore to this statement a less polemical valence than it has for Engels himself. In his case (and often in that of Marx), cerebral insularity seems to signal little more than the pitfalls of superstructural illusion, that faith in subjective autonomy Marxist "science" all too neatly opposed to the objective realities of class struggle and mode of production. Hence the ease with which Engels bypasses the problem of utopic figuration and form, denigrating it to the status of a "fantastic covering, a "mystical shell" that must be cracked and thrown away if one is to taste the truth of utopia's "rational kernel."[19] Ironically, such a schema

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[16] Andreae, pp. 168, 171-2. In a sense, *Christianopolis'* explicit fusion of the petty producer and the humanist scholar constitutes the interface between the otherwise divergent imaginaries of More's *Utopia,* on the one hand, and Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) and Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1637), on the other.

[17] Andreae, p. 152.

[18] Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,* trans. Edward Aveling, New York, International Publishers, 1994, p. 36.

[19] The juxtaposition of "rational kernel" to "mystical shell" occurs in the "Afterword" to the second German edition of *Capital,* when Marx points to the necessity of standing the Hegelian idealist dialectic "on its head" so as to foreground what is rational within a henceforth mystifying process of thought

depends on a binary opposition the Marxian denunciation of subjective illusion is bound to problematize, if not altogether short-circuit. For in his very effort to denounce the "factitious autonomy" and abstraction at the heart of all idealisms, Marx, as Derrida has demonstrated quite meticulously, becomes unwittingly enmeshed in the topological and tropological play of the figure—the figure, quite tellingly, of the head: what in Marx's critique of idealism is portrayed as staying "there, in the head" must also be denounced as what comes "out of the head" and acknowledged, necessarily, as what "survives *outside the head*." "But nothing would be possible," not even the spirit of Marxist critique itself, Derrida remarks, "without the surviving, without the possible survival of this autonomy and this automatism outside the head."[20]

II. Form as Content

In Derrida's reading of what we have seen is the allegorical emblem of the utopian imagination—the insular cerebrum—the latter is ultimately defined by what "it can neither contain, nor delimit."[21] As with heads, so with what they both imagine and mirror in the annals of utopian fiction: utopia's islands will also prove to be impure figures, situated in an indefinite zone between "content" and "form," "utterance" and "enunciating instance," "product and process," "message" and "medium"—in short, the series of binaries on which both traditionally sociological and traditionally literary readings of the genre have been based. This, then, will be the methodological wager of the following reflections: to locate, in the hermeneutic problems posed by the formal figure of the utopian island, a means of moving beyond what Fredric Jameson calls the "sterile and static opposition between formalism and a sociological or historical use of literature."[22]

(*Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, New York, International Publishers, 1967, p.20.). Engels subsequently preserves the metaphor in pointing out the "stupendously grand thoughts" utopian socialism contains within its "phantastic covering" (*Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, p. 36). For a discussion of the complicating import of *Utopia* for Marx and Engels's schema of mystifying surface and materialist core, see Richard Halpern, "Rational Kernel, Mystical Shell: Reification and Desire in Thomas More's *Utopia*" in *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1991, pp. 136-41.

[20] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 171. Derrida is clearly capitalizing on the etymological connotations of survival [*sur-vivre*] to suggest the scandalous continuation of the life of the concept beyond and in excess of the limits of what generates it in the first place.

[21] Derrida, p. 172.

[22] Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 331.

A significant step in that direction would be to point out the presence in the utopian genre of a politically overdetermined version of aesthetic formalism—the tendency to invest society with the attributes of autonomy, finitude and closure that traditional aesthetics has applied to the poetic object. This peculiar interplay between formal determination and political exigency has been forcibly defended by James Holstun, who has argued against the rigidity of the distinction between literary and non-literary utopianism by drawing attention to the constant interplay between social and textual form and between these and the discursive production of alternative regimes of authority and power.[23] It has also been highlighted by J.C. Davis, who has usefully distinguished early modern utopia from its millenarian counterparts by juxtaposing the utopia's attachment to "formal structure" to millennialism's emphasis on a messianic violence that lays waste to the fallen world of established social forms and norms.[24] From the viewpoint of the early modern utopist, Davis suggests, social malaise and discontent are not the guilty signs of a sinful world; they are the symptoms of "deficient formality," emissions of noise that point to zones of systemic malfunction.[25] The response to such problems is reformist in the strict sense that it predicates collective and individual happiness on the invention and application of better and more functional forms: customs, cultural practices and populations as they exist in the present are so many instances of "disorganized raw material," of "flawed and recalcitrant substance" that need to be remolded, "ordered and harmonized by formality."[26] Hence the provenance in the utopic text of all these exhaustively detailed blueprints, whose goal is to specify the reorganization and refitting of forms of collective and individual life, from the basic domains of production, exchange, administration, education, or sexuality, to the more exotic realms of the alimentary, hygienic or ornamental.

Roland Barthes' *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* has suggested that the singular and ambitiously *nomothetic* modes of writing it discusses are predicated on a spatial logic of "self-isolation" and "enclosure;" the observation, as Fourier's inclusion in Barthes' group of textual *nomothetes* already suggests, is of great import to the

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[23] James Holstun, *A Rational Millennium: Puritan Utopias of Seventeenth-Century England and America.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 9-10.

[24] J.C. Davis, "Formal Utopia/Informal Millennium: The Struggle Between Form and Substance as a Context for Seventeenth-Century Utopianism" in Krishnan Kumar and Stephen Bann (eds.), *Utopias and the Millennium*, London, Reaktion Books, 1993, p. 22.

[25] Davis, p. 21.

[26] Holstun, p. 13; Davis, p. 21.

analysis of utopic discourse.[27] If "society" can be imaginatively grasped in terms of a totalizable series of ingeniously arranged and interlocking assemblages, it is because it is imaged as something at once total and finite, pictured as a "manageable totality," to evoke Greg Dening's telling description of the traditional island imaginary.[28] Social form is hence necessarily circumscribed and given ideological valence by spatial form, a form that in early modern utopias articulates rationalized geography (the geometrically shaped island) to the architectonics of the collectivity (the beehive, the grid or checkerboard, the concentric circle).[29] The tendency of early modern utopianism to treat geography and architecture as functionally interchangeable is suggestive: as a projected image, Utopia, unlike Arcadia or the Land of Cockaygne, constitutes a rationalist colonization of nature by discursive schematization. The utopian *insula* is the product of a topography that always subordinates the contingencies of landscape to specific discursive and administrative ends. Already in Plato's *Critias*, the island capital's birth is described in the language of craftsmanship and intelligent design; the God "fashioned [*τορνεύων*] two such round wheels, as we may call them, of earth, and three of sea from the very center of the island, at uniform distances" ["*πάντη ἴσον ἀφεστῶτας*"]. [30] "Constructed space," in Françoise Choay's words, is "superimposed upon natural space, negating the latter's differences and extending the isotropic arrangement of its surface."[31]

This rationalized and schematized space is in early modern utopia more than an object of contemplation; it is a machine capable of producing social subjects without recourse to the permanent vigilance of a philosopher-king. This is the ideological import of what Kendrick has called "the formal hegemony of the setting" in the utopian text: the utopian island, born in the mind, is also the means through which the subjective element of the utopian imagination seeks to abolish itself, magically investing its object with the potency of an autonomous and generative subject. [32] Consider, for instance, the following passage from More's *Utopia*:

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[27] Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. 4, 17.

[28] Greg Dening, "Afterword," *Islands in History and Representation*, p. 203.

[29] On the geometric fixations of utopian architecture and urbanism see Ruth Eaton, "The City as an Intellectual Exercise," *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*, pp. 119-39; and Gervereau, pp. 357-67.

[30] Plato, Crit. 113d.

[31] Françoise Choay, "Utopia and the Philosophical Status of Constructed Space," *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World,* p. 347.

[32] Kendrick, "Uneven Development," p. 240.

> they say (and the appearance of the place confirms this) that their land was not always an island. But Utopus, who conquered the country and gave it its name (it had previously been called Abraxa), brought its rude and uncouth inhabitants to such a high level of culture and humanity that they now excel in that regard almost every other people. After subduing them at his first landing, he cut a channel fifteen miles wide where their land had joined the continent, and caused the sea to flow around the country.[33]

Social reform is here clearly predicated on a prior act of spatial, indeed literally geological, reformation. The original engine of such reformation is the founder-king, who must nonetheless be assumed to lapse into insignificance once his nomothetic wisdom is objectified in the constructed space of the island and its cities. Utopia, a Republic ruled by a regularly elected governor, will continue to produce virtuous and responsible citizens as it were automatically, irrespectively of its founder's physical and political death.[34] Like a script that prescribes performance, constructed space perpetually dictates the workings of the society it houses: square in shape—and thus geometrically embodying replicable equality within the circular enclave of the island—the capital of Amaurot is administratively divided into four equal districts, which are themselves subdivided into twenty-five equally sized quarters.[35] The quarter—which in its turn encloses the communal garden—functions as the city's primary *social* unit. It is the site of collective household life, but also an inverted and miniature version of the city's articulation to nature and the country. The streets separating the quarters from each other also work to bind them into *political* units, since the elected representatives of each group (syphogrants) who reside on each street's main hall administer the affairs of families on both their own and the opposite side of the street.[36] While the individual household is run as a micro-state, with "the oldest of every household" as the ruler, and a chain of command that descends from husbands to wives, parents to children and elders to the young, urban planning ingeniously safeguards

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[33] Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Robert M. Adams, New York, W.W Norton, 1975, p. 35.

[34] On the paradoxical powerlessness of the Utopian founder and legislator and his role as "vanishing mediator" see Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London, Verso, 2005, pp. 86-87.

[35] As Gervereau remarks, the square can be divided and multiplied *ad infinitum* without distortion of its original ratio ("Symbolic Collapse," pp. 359-61).

[36] See More, *Utopia*, p. 46; Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play*, trans. Robert Vollrath, Atlantic Highlands, N.J., Humanities Press, 1984, p. 125.

the articulation of the quarter's multiplied household to the administrative organization of Utopian society at large.

Coiled around the empty center of its womb-like bay, More's island does not appear to need the austere ministrations of a philosophically inclined ruler.[37] "*Una ego terrarum omnium absque philosophia/Civitatem philosophicam expressi mortalibus*" reads the quatrain appended in the *parerga* of the book's first edition—"I alone in the entire world have represented the philosophical city to mortals without the aid of philosophy."[38] "Autonomy, "in John Caputo's words, "is a perfect circle, beginning and ending in the self."[39] No wonder that the *figura insulae*, poetically given licence to speak for itself, tells us nothing—nothing, that is, except for the fact that it speaks for itself, without the need of philosophical or conceptual mediation. Like its geographical morphology, island speech is circular: a speech that coils around its own tail, phantasmatically endowed with an impossible plenitude.

Hence it is that in utopian discourse, society, space and text appear to endlessly mirror each other, like so many homologous versions of the same principle of triumphant autarchy. This is precisely the rhetorical import of More's description of the creation of Utopia, which imperceptibly moves us from an account of the effects of social engineering—the transformation of people "rude and uncouth" into ones humane and civilized—to the description of a foundational act of prophylactic circumscription—the separation of the island from the barbaric continent—and from thence to the self-reflexive imprint of what Louis Marin calls "a sign of a disconnection or break" which "indicates that…we are leaving a discourse that speaks of the world and entering the world of discourse itself."[40] Reading the becoming-island of a former continent as allegorical trace of the becoming self-referential of the world of discourse, Marin suggests that the influx of water that creates the island of Utopia does not merely circumscribe the space henceforth to be occupied by the denizens of what Fredric Jameson has recently called "the utopian enclave;" it also serves the function of a moat that engulfs the *text* called *Utopia*—that world of discourse that rises in the midst of an apparently descriptive discourse of the world. [41]

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[37] As Marin points out, More uses the Latin *alvus* (=stomach, womb, bowels) to designate the hollowed out center that is utopia's harbor (*Utopics*, p. 104).

[38] Marin, p. 116.

[39] John D. Caputo, "Without Sovereignty, Without Being: Unconditionality, The Coming God and Derrida's Democracy to Come," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 4., nº 3, Spring 2003, p.11.

[40] Louis Marin, *On Representation*, trans. Catherine Porter, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001, p.94.

[41] See Jameson, *Archaeologies*, pp. 10-21.

What this already means, however, is that the sign of a discursive break ultimately mutates into the figure of a break that rifts the sign—that privileged sign of identity that is the proper name: "Utopia," as its ambiguous etymological derivation already augurs, is not the name of a One, the sign of an entity fully identical to itself. It names both the island and the ideal commonwealth it contains; but it is also the name of what contains them both—the discursive enclave of a book and, at a further remove, of a genre. A continent births an island that engenders a society, which in turn generates the book that contains all three.[42] The book, in turn, retrospectively emerges as the originator or progenitor of a genre that inevitably comes to contain it within its own domain.[43] Doesn't the sliding of the sign "Utopia" along the moments of this sequence foreground the volatility of the boundary between interiority and exteriority, between contained and containing bodies? And doesn't the uncertainty over the proper place of the proper name add a decidedly deconstructive note to the meaning of Utopia's proverbial externality to the ontological determinations of place?

III. No Island is an Island

We have no doubt reached a disturbing undecideability, one that lies at the heart of the insular imaginary the utopian genre both projects and embodies. If the caesarean cut that births the island reinvests "genre" with the gendered imaginary of generation and birthing, it also evokes the metaphorics of what Derrida has called the "floodgate" [*écluse*] of the genre-clause, that closing that "excludes itself from what it includes" and that hence "keeps it from closing, from identifying itself with itself."[44] If the island of Utopia already allegorizes its generic identity, or, to put it otherwise, if genre is an island of crystallized and calcified conventions floating calmly on the sea of discourse, its mark of circumscription is necessarily unstable, compelled to oscillate incessantly between the poles of what it initially appears to separate: inclusion and exclusion, closure and openness, autonomy and heteronomy. "[T]he literary historian," Bakhtin and Medvedev were to observe in the context of their critique of the formalist method's insular conception of the

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[42] It is important to remember that the book's first volume was composed after More had finished writing the description of the island and its society in the second volume. See J. H. Hexter, "The Composition of Utopia," *The Complete Works of Sir Thomas More*, Vol. 4, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1965, pp. xxvii-xli.

[43] "For a genre's first works," notes Gary Saul Morson, "become exemplars only through the unforeseen creation of later works and the unanticipated emergence of a common hermeneutic approach…the original text is, in effect, recreated by its own progeny." *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's* Diary of a Writer *and the Traditions of Literary Utopia*, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1981, pp.74-75.

[44] Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," trans. Avital Ronell in W.J.T. Mitchell (ed.), *On Narrative*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 61.

literary text, "must be careful not to turn the literary environment into an absolutely closed-off, self-sufficient world…the individuality of a system…is based exclusively on the interaction of the system as a whole and in each of its elements with other systems."[45] Such worldliness is figured—in a spirit that is almost proleptically Derridean—via the explication of the utterly paradoxical topology of the properly literary:

> in being determined from within, the literary phenomenon is thereby determined externally also, for the literature which determines it is itself determined from without. And in being determined from without , it thereby is also determined from within, for internal factors determine it precisely as a literary work in its specificity and in connection with the whole situation, and not outside that situation. Thus, intrinsic turns out to be extrinsic, and the reverse.[46]

"Intrinsic turns out to be extrinsic, and the reverse;" we should not be surprised to discover, within the Morean island that constitutes the topographic nucleus or seed of a genre, the traces of a very similar topological instability:

> The island of the Utopians is…crescent-shaped like a new moon. Between the horns of the crescent…the sea enters and spreads into a broad bay. Being sheltered from the wind by the surrounding land, the bay is never rough, but quiet and smooth instead like a big lake. Thus, nearly the whole inner coast is one great harbor, across which ships pass in every direction, to the great advantage of the people…Near the middle of the channel, there is one rock that rises above the water…on top of it a tower has been built, and there a garrison is kept…Since the other rocks lie under water, they are very dangerous to navigation. The channels are known only to the Utopians, so hardly any strangers enter the bay without one of their pilots.[47]

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[45] M.M Bakhtin/P.M. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, trans. Albert J. Wehrle, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 29.

[46] Bakhtin/Medvedev, p. 29.

[47] More, *Utopia*, p. 34. A similar (and similarly gendered) schema animates *Richard II's* fashioning of England as a "teeming womb" of outbound kings which is itself impregnable, protected by the "fortress" and "moat" of water.

An opening formed within the enclosing arms of the island's edges, the bay is both a convenient port of departure for Utopians and a prohibitive barricade for outsiders: from the outside looking in, it presents the face of a fortified citadel, guarded by a garrison and protected by submerged rocks that can sink and destroy any incoming enemy ship. From the inside looking out, it is a placid and smooth lake that safely shelters outbound Utopian fleets. The first view points to the static image of a bounded totality, of the island as a full stop, to recall Gervereau's apt analogy; the second gestures toward motion and travel, to the island as a site of embarkation, adventure, even conquest. Both a travel narrative and a static description, both a mode of worldly and critical engagement and one of withdrawal into the fantasy of absolute self-sufficiency, More's text emerges as the figure of a figure, a textual island rifted by the topographical ambivalences it registers on the picture of its geographical referent.

It is now time to return, circuitously as it were, to our earlier proposition that insular form is likely to reveal itself as utopia's latent content; and hence to our suggestion that, as in a Möbius band, a formally attentive reading of utopian insularity will inevitably lead into the formulation of the principles of a historically resonant one. For if the instabilities of the island figure and of the gaze that describes it allegorize the failure of generic containment, they also tend to dramatize the historical antinomies that haunt the genre at its birth. The insular enclave spatializes the moral economy of a society of independent and autarchic producers at the same time that it stamps upon it the formal imprint of land enclosure, the very process through which the prospects of petty agrarian production were being foreclosed, swallowed by the emerging forces of agrarian capitalism. The prospects of emancipation from feudal fealty and dependence, their negative counterparts in proletarianizing landlessness and vagrancy, the appearance of enclosure both as a social policy of mass dispossession and as an inevitable outcome of the geometric and economic rationalization of land—all these conflicting ideological *semes* of the transition from late feudalism to early capitalism will reemerge in the guise of insular paradox: Utopias are enclosures which do not dispossess, non-places whose inhabitants are not landless, geometrically conceptualized spaces that possess the binding force of organic communities.

Severed from the utopian island, history is ultimately that which severs the island from itself: if early modern utopias tend to hypostatize the communally regenerative power of invented spatial form, such hypostatization is also an indirect testament to the simultaneously cognitive and economic transformation of space itself, its gradual extrication from unselfconscious experience and its

conversion into an object that "could be invented intellectually," "conceived" as an abstraction.[48] Under the impact of "incipient deterritorialization," Christopher Kendrick suggests, "the territorial feudal world, the world of determinate *locales* or places...becomes a world of abstract space. A social system defined in terms of interdependent places, upon which jurisdiction is parcellized or layered, gives way to a system constituted in terms of an overarching and uniformly extensive space."[49] Here is More's *Utopia* once again:

> There are fifty-four cities on the island, all spacious and magnificent, identical in language, customs, institutions, and laws. So far as location permits, all of them are built on the same plan, and have the same appearance. The nearest are at least twenty-four miles apart, and the farthest are not so remote that a man cannot go on foot from one to the other in a day.[50]

Shaped by a discourse that envisioned geometry as truth and nature as "a vast geometrical system," the *quattrocento* invention of perspective that informs More's vision made it possible to imagine a "fully rational" (systematic, homogeneous and isotropic) space.[51] Though such space is envisioned, as we have seen, as the objective foundation of Utopian communalism, it is also inevitably the product of a "systematic abstraction" from the logic of "psychophysiological space" —an index of the unmooring, in other words, of abstract and systemic "form" from the plural and heterogeneous "content" of situated experience.[52] Historically speaking, then, the egalitarian architectonics of the Utopian vision lay all too close to the spatial logic of capitalism itself; the representational erasure of the "local determinations" of geography and history and of the plural and differentiating experience of specific places by a "neutral" geometrical language paves the way not merely to the

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[48] See Eaton, p. 121; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991, pp. 38, 41.

[49] Kendrick, "More's *Utopia* and Uneven Development," p. 241.

[50] More, p. 35. As Robert M. Adams notes (*Utopia*, p. 35), there is effectively no difference between the distance of the "nearest" and "farthest" cities, and the apparent juxtaposition of the two serves only to accentuate the principle of isotropic arrangement that informs the larger description.

[51] See Nina Joblon, "Power, Illusion and the Technology of Perspective in the Renaissance," *Techné: Journal of Technology Studies* vol. 5, Winter 1995, n.p; Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood, New York: Zone Books, 1997, pp. 28-9, 70. On the partial deployment of perspective in the woodcuts of Utopia's first two editions, see Kendrick, *Utopia, Carnival, and Commonwealth*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, pp. 40-53.

[52] Panofsky, p. 30.

orderliness of utopian nowheres but also to the urban grid and the property survey, those placeless spaces generated by the capitalist transformation of feudal territoriality.[53] The utopian enclave's tendency to image itself as an organic community insulated from the turbulence of an epochal transition is hence betrayed by the formal replication of the homogenizing, delocalizing function of the emerging mode of production. As with the redeployment of enclosure as a means of consolidating and insulating the community of petty producers rather than one of dispossessing them, and as with the transformation of the decoded masses' literal landlessness (*ou-topia*) into an affirmative trait, utopian insularity turns out to yield tortuous testimony to the persistence of history.[54]

"No island is an island" claims historian Carlo Ginzburg in his recent book on the worldly engagements of "English" literature, elegantly revising John Donne's famous *Meditation XVII*.[55] No island, to speak in a fashion that should be taken as at once historically materialist and philosophically deconstructive, manages to close itself seamlessly around itself, to be at one, circularly and tautologically, with itself. Utopian insularity is no exception to this rule of island "incontinence."[56] Could it be otherwise, given that the caesura which births utopian islands marks both the "closure of a system" and "the experience of the total formal break"—in short, the co-presence, in one and the same spatial figure, of demarcation and rupture, boundedness and discontinuity, zealous inwardness and irreducible worldliness?[57] And doesn't such co-presence limn what, on the occasion of this colloquium, we were invited to undertake: reflection, that is to say, a thought that turns or flexes itself back to itself only to find itself altered, released from the centripetal pull of the self-same?

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[53] Choay, p. 250.

[54] "After all," James Holstun remarks, "enclosure itself is a utopian activity that creates new spaces, social groupings, and modes of production by eliminating customary and irrational uses of land like those the Utopians abhor overseas." It would thus, he adds, be advisable to see More's response to the decoding of the feudal body brought about by enclosure not as a dismissive reaction, but as an attempt at control and rationalization (pp. 70-71).

[55] Carlo Ginzburg, *No Island is an Island: Four Glances at English Literature in a World Perspective*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000.

[56] See Edmond and Smith, p. 12.

[57] Jameson, *Archaeologies*, p. 231.